The World of

The Positively Last Performance

Ideas for exploring Geraldine McCaughrean’s novel with pupils in Years 5, 6, 7 and 8 (P5, P6, P7 and S1)
Introduction

*The Positively Last Performance* by Geraldine McCaughrean is a funny, touching and exciting ghost story. It tells the story of English seaside towns and the changes they have seen since their heydays in the 18th and 19th centuries. The story is set in a place called Seashaw, based on Margate in Kent.

It is the story of the individuals, both real and fictional, who have made this particular town what it is.

Finally, it is the story of the Calders, a contemporary family who have made their home in Seashaw and want to refurbish and rejuvenate the Royal Theatre.

This novel would be ideal as a class reader for upper primary or lower secondary pupils, as a text for a reading group or the focus of a project for pupils transferring to secondary school. It encourages children to think about issues such as:

- The relationship that seaside resorts and other tourist towns have with their visitors and the impact that changes in outsiders’ tastes and holiday patterns can have on the local community.
- How everyone, whether famous or not, makes a contribution to their community that affects the course of history.
- How the dead can influence the living, and the role memories play in individual and social consciousness.
- What the work of actors and other creative artists involves, whether this has changed over time and what they need to do their best work.
Synopsis

The dilapidated seaside resort of Seashaw feels like home to Gracie Calder after she’s spent every summer there for her 11 years. Now the Calders hope to re-open the derelict Royal Theatre and Gracie is looking forward to a permanent home there. But the building has a lot of problems (including mould, strange smells and a collapsing dress circle), and Gracie’s parents are worried and distracted. Left to her own devices, Gracie discovers that she can see the ghosts who live in the theatre (the ‘Residents’) and she encourages them to tell their stories.

The Residents range from those whose reputation survives them, such as the painter J M W Turner or ‘William’, who once painted scenery at the Royal, and the lesser-known Eugenius Birch, who designed the pier at Margate, to those caught up in calamitous events, such as Florence Melluish, the librarian washed away in the 1808 tidal wave, or Mikey the Mod, killed by a gang of Rockers one Bank Holiday in the 1950s. The actors Roland and Lily Oliver, longing to recapture their glory days on stage, are the self-appointed leaders of the Residents of the Royal. There are also animal Residents including beach donkeys and the lions and bears who spent winters in Seashaw with Sanger’s Circus.

As Gracie learns more about the Residents, she introduces them to the modern-day Seashaw. Some are unhappy that the town’s former attractions have fallen into disrepair, although William is delighted to find a new art gallery that houses many of his paintings. Meanwhile, Will and Ellie hope the developer Mr Sapper will fund their plans to restore the Royal. But one of the Residents, the black-and-white minstrel Maurice, follows Sapper home and discovers that he is a crook who is sending an arsonist, Demolition Den, to destroy the theatre.

Gracie wants to warn her parents, but in doing so is forced to acknowledge an unhappy truth about herself that prevents her from doing so. The Residents work out that only happy ghosts can communicate with the living, but the Residents are mostly miserable and it’s their sighing breath that has covered the Royal in mould. After foiling Demolition Den while Will and Ellie are asleep, they decide that to save the theatre they will have to leave it. As they leave, the mould vanishes and the local council’s structural engineer decides that the Royal has a future.

With a final performance for all the ghosts of Seashaw, the Residents generate enough positive energy to tell the Calders everything they need to know. Gracie, as the newest and happiest Resident, uses her living friends in Seashaw to show the Calders a plan to repair the dress circle and produce a lost Turner backcloth to fund the repairs. As Will and Ellie slowly recover from the loss of Gracie, they often feel that their daughter is still with them in their new enterprise.
Talking Points
(to be explored after reading the book)

The Structure of *The Positively Last Performance*

Geraldine McCaughrean’s novel has a portmanteau story structure, where the stories of each Resident are told in turn within the main story.

*The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, in which each pilgrim tells a tale, is another example of this story structure.

- What others can you think of?

Portmanteau stories also have an overall narrative that wraps around and eventually links the individual stories. In *The Positively Last Performance*, the Residents’ stories are linked to the past but the overall story of Gracie and her parents connects the Residents to their town today.

- Does the overall present-day story ever become stronger than the individual stories?
- What is the key piece of information that makes the overall story more compelling?
- How do we feel as readers when we discover this information?
- If you read the early chapters a second time knowing this key piece of information, what do you notice that you have not noticed before?
On the Map

In her Afterword to *The Positively Last Performance*, Geraldine McCaughrean explains how the book was inspired by a request that she should write a story about Margate.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of basing a novel on a real place?

Use reference books, libraries and the internet to find out about and collect visual references for the key events in Margate’s history experienced by the residents, including:

- The 1808 tidal wave
- The opening and closing of Eugenius Birch’s pier
- The fights between the Mods and Rockers
- The opening and closing of Dreamland (Funland in the book)

Also:

- Collect images of the paintings of J M W Turner, especially those of the coast around Margate. What does Turner say in the novel about why he loved painting in Seashaw (Margate)? Write captions for the paintings to connect his work with what he says.

As an extension project, use reference books, libraries and the internet to find out about your own town. Explore:

- Key events
- Famous people

You could also interview local residents and family members about their experiences.
Mind, Body and Spirit: the nature of ghosts

Write down all the ways in which the Residents know they are no longer alive.

What makes Gracie understand that she is one of the Residents?

Gracie still speaks to various living people in Seashaw:

- Her parents
- Tamburlaine in the Bong Shop
- Bob in the Yes We Can shop.

When is she most successful in getting her message across? Does her approach change after she realises she is a Resident?
1. Wish you were here: fresh air and fun by the sea

Maurice refers to Seashaw as Happiness-on-Sea, even in the middle of the First World War.

- Why is it important to Seashaw to be thought of as a place that makes people happy?

In the book, present-day Seashaw has fewer holiday visitors than before but it still makes Gracie happy.

- Why is Seashaw so special to Gracie?

Although Gracie came to Seashaw as a child on holiday, the Residents had other reasons for coming.

- What brought Mikey, William and the twins, Jim and Joanie, to Seashaw?
- If they found happiness, was it in the way they expected?

What are some of the features of the town that create happy times for

- Gracie
- The other Residents?

*The Positively Last Performance* refers to many real places in Margate (on which Seashaw is based) created specifically to entertain visitors.

Use reference books, libraries and the internet to research and collect visual references for:

- The beaches including bathing machines and donkey rides.
- The Shell Grotto
- Dreamland (called Funland in *The Positively Last Performance*)
- The Royal Theatre.

If there is a seaside resort close to where you live, or your family has visited one on holiday, collect visual references from that too including your own family holiday pictures (try to include some from older relatives, friends or neighbours to show how it’s changed).

- Display your findings.
2. Seashaw lives well lived

Each of the Residents died knowing what would make them happy, although not all of them had had the chance to experience happiness to the full.

Choose three of the Residents and ask about each one:

- What did they want to achieve in their life?
- Did they achieve it before or after their death?
- Did they understand what they had achieved, before and/or after their death?
- How are they remembered today? This can include things they have created or the way their lives affected others.
- Did they achieve or understand anything after their death that they had not achieved/understood in life?
- What was it about Seashaw in particular that made them happy?

Write and illustrate an obituary page in the Seashaw Star for each of the Residents, giving them equal space and outlining their achievements. For some (such as J M W Turner), there is a lot of information available besides what is in the book; for others you can use your imagination to add to the picture that Geraldine McCaughrean has created.
The roar of the greasepaint: theatrical families

Compare Roland and Lily Oliver with Gracie’s parents, Will and Ellie Calder, two couples who made their lives in the theatre.

We are given a lot of information about the roles Roland and Lily have played on tour.

- Use reference books and the internet to find examples of theatre posters and programmes from the Olivers’ heyday (the late 19th and early 20th century).
- Design posters and programmes for the Olivers’ performances.

Roland was more famous than his wife in his lifetime, although they were both busy working actors.

- Does this seem fair?
- How does Roland’s view of himself as an actor change during the course of the book?

The Olivers did not combine their work as actors with having children. What might it have been like being their child and being brought up in the theatres where they worked?

- Write a story about growing up backstage with the Olivers.

The Royal Theatre, Margate, built in 1787, is similar to many other provincial theatres in the country.

- If there is a theatre near your home that is 200 years or more old, use your local library, reference books and the internet to find out it and collect images for a display. Ask older relatives, friends and neighbours for memories of visiting the theatre and, if you still can, visit it yourself.
- Display your findings.
About the author

Geraldine McCaughrean was born and educated in Enfield, North London. She trained as a teacher, worked for ten years in publishing, and in 1988 became a full-time writer. Since then Geraldine has written over 160 books and plays for both adults and children, including *Peter Pan in Scarlet*, the official sequel to J M Barrie’s Peter Pan.

Geraldine McCaughrean has won the Carnegie Medal, the Whitbread Children's Book Award (three times), the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Smarties Bronze Award (four times), the Blue Peter Book of the Year award and the Blue Peter Special Book to Keep Forever award. In the States, accolades have included the Printz Award, America’s most prestigious teen-book prize.